



Bleeding Stubs: Is The Time Ripe for Target-Language Bias in African Literature?

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Abstract— Several African novels and short stories have been analysed linguistically. Those works found that the stories employed the linguistic style set by Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa. This paper looks at the style of Besong's *Bleeding Stubs*, a short fiction by an emerging controversial African author. It has not been analysed before. African English refers to varieties of the English language spoken and written across Africa, often influenced by local languages and cultures, resulting in unique expressions and idiomatic usage. It encompasses different forms, including Nigerian English, Kenyan English and South African English, reflecting the diverse linguistic landscape of the continent. Besong exploits the full potency of standard British English instead of African English to produce a fun and convoluted story despite its brevity. We suggest some reasons why he may be writing in this style. The story stands out because of its unique style compared to the works of fellow African authors. However, current African literary interests suggest that it may face resistance from most African authors and readers, as it stays clear of the African English prevalent in African works. We also touch on why African writers might resist Besong's style and stick to the status quo set by the pioneers of African literature.



Keywords— African literature, linguistic analysis, African English, unique style, literary resistance.

I. INTRODUCTION

We chose *Bleeding Stubs* (Besong, 2024)—an entertaining and action-packed short fiction—for this study because of its linguistic differences from typical African fictional writing. However, before we delve into the story, we present a background of studies examining the primary writing styles in other African stories.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, published in 1958, is often regarded as the cornerstone of modern African literature from an international perspective. It spearheaded African Literature's recognition and influence on the global stage. The novel is set in pre-colonial Nigeria and focuses on the life of Okonkwo, a respected leader and warrior of the Igbo community (Achebe, 1958). Okonkwo's fear of being perceived as weak drives him to success but also leads to his downfall.

Several years later, Nwapa's novel *Efuru* came with the eponymous female protagonist whose economic standing

challenged that of her husband, which did not sit well with her patriarchal environment (Nwapa, 1966).

An author's style is the sum total of the features and language habits that distinguish them as a writer (Wales, 2011). This sum total may be the linguistic fingerprint of a particular text (Leech & Short, 2007, p.1). Figures of speech, such as simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole and anaphora, are commonly used by every experienced writer. Kosasih (2019) studied these aspects in Achebe's style. The literary devices treated in Kosasih's paper are present in Western novels and are, therefore, not unique to Achebe. Achebe's writing was largely influenced by European writers (Killam, 1969, p.2). What makes Achebe's storytelling linguistically different from Western novels are:

- his rich portrayal of Igbo culture.
- transliteration of Igbo words.

- source-language bias in both the dialogue and the narrative (specifically in the syntax, vocabulary and grammar).

Flora Nwapa depicts a similar linguistic approach. Many African authors and literary analysts argue that the works of Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa have provided substantial foundations for the modelling of African literature (Uwakwe & Amadi, 2021). Therefore, it makes sense that African storytellers would write in English—using the blueprint from the pioneers of modern African Literature.

Linguistic analysis abounds on various African works of fiction. Gikandi (1991) explores how Achebe employs African English to reflect African cultural contexts and oral traditions. Okuyade (2009) focuses on Achebe's strategic use of African English to convey the themes and cultural nuances in *Things Fall Apart*. Osakwe (1999) examines how Nwapa integrates oral traditions and linguistic elements of the Igbo culture into her novel. Many African authors have received similar scrutiny, which has revealed comparable diction.

Africanness in African Literature.

In literature, Africanness refers to representing and expressing African cultural identity, traditions, values and experiences, often emphasising the African continent's unique social, historical and political contexts. Writing in African English has become a part and parcel of Africanness.

Ohia (2023) asserts that African literary writers are committed to keeping African fiction a protest literature. This can be seen in Achebe's novels. This type of narrative portrays characters of the oppressed community standing up against the oppressor, such as the government or the coloniser. This resistance includes linguistic and cultural aspects. Subsequent African writers have primarily written similar narratives to underpin their Africanness. As per the present article, another term for protest literature is victim literature.

African literary researchers take pleasure in analysing novels of communal victimhood. Many articles highlight the cruelty of colonisation in Africa and the upheavals it incited. Other articles examine colonisation's linguistic angle and Africa's resistance to the English language.

This protest mentality is seen in Achebe's antagonism toward Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe (1977) criticised Joseph Conrad for describing Africa and her people as dark and savage in that novel. Achebe wrote several accusatory articles on *The Heart of Darkness*. Numerous African literary scholars have followed suit in viewing the novel in a negative light.

From a linguistic angle, Achebe (1975) laid the foundation for African victim literature and its complementary African English when he wrote: "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings."

Writers and scholars who say Africans must write their novels in African languages have proposed an even more drastic strategy toward language resistance. They expressed their strong opinion at the Makerere Conference in 1962, where they opposed Achebe and others for using English for African literature. Two camps emerged from the conference. One was led by the late Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who advocated using African English. The other was led by the Kenyan literary critic and writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, pressing for the use of African languages in novels and other literary works (Mutamda, 2017).

An Enticing African Writer Threatens the Africanness in African Literature.

In this sub-section, we introduce *Bleeding Stubs*. In the next section, we will conduct a linguistic analysis, comparing it with that of a typical African author.

Bleeding Stubs (2024) is an action-packed short fiction by Donald O. Besong. In the story, Lasso Tambong is an exceptional recruit of Besong's fictional African Military Intelligence Bureau (AMIB). The young gendarme is obsessed with stoicism. His mind has been toying with climbing the jagged wall of a forbidden cliff without a mountaineer's tools. Then, one morning, his obsession suddenly shoots through the roof after a virtual meeting where his CIA boss, Sean Geiger, recounted his endurance after a bomb attack in a remote Iraqi field. Lasso then makes a bet with his teacher, Colonel Mvodo. Mvodo will win if Lasso cannot resist the urge to claw up the lethal cliff. The young recruit is now caught in a dilemma that jeopardises his winnings, even suspecting that his obsession with the cliff is due to Mvodo's subliminal verbiage over the years. Agent Lasso sneaks to the bottom of the cliff to execute the much-thirsted climb that very night. And yes, with his bare hands! To him, this feat is an ideal test of his endurance.

But the odds are not on his side. The story ends with Lasso inhaling a snake's deadly venom and Besong's suspenseful sentence:

It was hard for him to part with
consciousness.

We observe how brief the sentence is, yet it may carry various dark implications for the reader's mind. This is a

grim scene in which the stubs of Lasso's fingers bleed after being scraped on the rough, thorny wall. Thus, Besong takes advantage of English's full potency to create dark suspense when Lasso loses consciousness.

In the next section, we take a deeper look at the story from a linguistic viewpoint.

1. Analysis

Bleeding Stubs (Besong, 2024) depicts certain linguistic aspects that are typically not used by other African authors.

Bleeding Stubs uses target-language bias.

The author of *Bleeding Stubs* uses English, the target language, in its full capacity. As seen in the introduction, the typical African author is source-language biased. For instance, the characters in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* use elevated diction to convey the structure of the Igbo speech (Achebe, 1958). This kind of diction is also found in the narrative. Consider the following proverb from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*:

When the moon is shining, the
cripple becomes hungry for a
walk.

The above saying appears in Chapter 2 of *Things Fall Apart*. It suggests that sometimes circumstances or events can inspire unexpected desires or actions in people. The syntax and choice of words are the same as those uttered in Igbo. This source-language bias is prevalent in Achebe's writing and the works of subsequent African fiction authors. *Bleeding Stubs* is different in that it is written with a target-language bias.

In novels by African authors (Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, to name a few), while the overall structure of the English language is followed, variations in syntax and grammar may reflect the influence of Nigerian languages. For instance, Adichie applies the omission of articles. In Nigerian English, articles (such as "a," "an," and "the") are sometimes omitted or used differently compared to standard English. For example, characters might say "Go to market" instead of "Go to the market."

However, *Bleeding Stubs* diverts drastically from the above. Let us examine the following excerpt from *Bleeding Stubs*:

Mvodo and Lasso talked shop
down the stairs and all the way
to the car park. They spoke in
AMIB code: Kool-M for
Geiger, Q-jungle for Iraq, etc.
"Kool-M could be summed up
in one word: stoic," Lasso said.

"You can say that again. The
top spy seems nowhere near
retirement. I would have quit
after the Q-jungle incident."

"I love his designer waistcoats
and bow ties. Bloke is neat,
Colonel. He'd make a good
clothes horse for CICAM's
fancy wax department."

vodo's hard mouth relaxed into
a smile. "What's more, he's
pushing seventy—double my
age, and I swear he is built for
it. I wish I had his balls."

In the above excerpt, the sentence structure in the characters' speeches and the narrative are in contemporary Western English. Since the author's mother tongue is African and the target language is English, this is known as target-language bias.

This is a lively conversation between Lasso and Mvodo as they leave a strategic meeting. They are talking about their CIA mentor. Notice expressions in the narrative, such as "talk shop," which suggests a strong target-language bias. This language bias is also strong in the conversation. Instead of "The bloke is neat," Lasso says, "Bloke is neat." In banter, this brevity of omitting "the" at the beginning of a sentence where humour is intended is common in spoken English in Britain and the USA and is usually done sparingly. Notice that it happens only once in *Bleeding Stubs*.

Using "balls" as a synonym for "courage" is also trendy in contemporary English.

Target-language bias may help English learners from across the globe improve their English while learning about Africa. Readers—much more so secondary English speakers—may need clarification when reading African English, which Besong avoids. Therefore, the plain English in *Bleeding Stubs* is more internationally palatable.

Bleeding Stubs does not use calque.

Calque refers to converting words or text from one language into another while maintaining the source language's grammar or syntax. It is common in African literature written in English. Contrary to the typical African novel, there are no instances of calque in the story. Likely motifs for the author's avoidance of calque might be:

- To push African readers to learn to express various situations in English
- To reach a wider readership

- To make his readers relax and enjoy the fun-packed story without having to cope with the writer's mother tongue
- To utilise the richness that English has accumulated over centuries as a written language

Bleeding Stubs does not use Code-Switching.

The frequent insertion of a secondary English speaker's native language, such as Igbo, into English is known as code-switching. Most African authors use code-switching. Adichie applied code-switching in *Purple Hibiscus* (Adichie, 2003). Throughout the novel, characters switch between English and Igbo while conversing. For instance, when Mama addresses Kambili and Jaja, she may say something like “*Ndo, my children, jisie ike*” (Igbo for “Sorry, my children, take heart”).

In *Bleeding Stubs*, Besong uses English to express every narrative, thought and spoken word, avoiding code-switching. However, perhaps to imply that French and English are common languages in Cameroon, he uses the following French words once:

- Bonjour (a jogger greeting Agent Lasso)
- Interdit (on a signboard)

Bleeding Stubs uses italics for the narrator's thoughts.

An author has several choices for expressing the viewpoint character's essential thoughts. They may use italics without a tag or avoid italics and include tags (he/she thought). Besong uses the former. According to the article “Inner Dialogue—Writing Character Thoughts” (2012), although this method might be too intrusive for the reader, it is universally understood. The researcher authoring this paper criticises the use of italics as thoughts because they are distracting and are rarely used in African literature. However, it is up to the reader's taste if they prefer italics.

Besong's characters don't code-switch, even in their inner thoughts.

This could have one or more of the following implications:

- The characters are so familiar with the coloniser's language that it has become their language of thought. From the realists' viewpoint, we see a Cameroonian society where people of a higher social status may be delighted with this mental colonisation.
- Besong may imply that the characters code-switch in their thoughts or even muse in Cameroonian languages, but he chose a standard English representation to make the story flow better.

- This may be his favourite strategy for dealing with multi-tribal people. The case is different when dealing with just one African language. For instance, the characters of *Things Fall Apart* are all from the Igbo tribe, making the author's application of code-switching to their thoughts possible.

II. CONCLUSION

African authors may use African English to protect their cultural identity, for authenticity, and to show language resistance. However, writing in African languages would be the most effective way of preserving the African cultural identity and resisting the English language. It is well established that to write in African languages, one must first learn the Latin Alphabet, which is a relic of colonisation. This implies they should be already educated in a European language (English, relevant to this paper) before learning to write in an African language. Therefore, African literature is caught in a nuanced loop.

English is more accessible to write than Igbo or any other African language. Therefore, African writers twisting English to fit their tribal languages may be the only way to resist English and propagate the African culture. Achebe and Nwapa—and their followers—write in that style to portray a strong tribal identity and resist imperialism.

On the other hand, Besong seems to glorify the coloniser's language. He diverts from the typical African writing style to achieve brevity, reach a wider audience, make his writing more universally understood and avoid language resistance—to name a few probable reasons. His target-language bias may shock African readers and writers who want to stay in their comfort zone and not have to make that effort to look at English more benignly. The humorous Besong seems to put the antagonism behind and write for the mere entertainment of his readers, portraying his Cameroonian patriotism in a fun way. That kind of writing might face colossal resistance from Africans right now, as they still crave victim literature.

The researcher argues that this is not the time for Besong's writing style because Africans are still battling for their cultural identity. In this regard, the data presented in this paper indicate that Africans who want to continue protest literature may resist the fun and coolness of *Bleeding Stubs*. Therefore, considering Africans' on-going struggle to reclaim their identity, Besong's book may be ill-timed.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Bleeding Stubs reads as authentic from the realist's viewpoint, depicting the possible interactions of today's

educated people in Africa. If anyone craves a fun-packed African story in a setting that goes beyond tribal barriers, this story is a must-read.

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